

SENIOR ESSAY

THE MORAL IMPLICATIONS
OF THE BLACK POWER MOVEMENT IN
THE LIVES OF BLACK PEOPLE

By
Marvin R. King
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IN THE LIVES OF BLACK PEOPLE

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By

Marvin R. King

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Interdenominational Theological Center
Atlanta, Georgia

Approved: _____

Dean

Date: April 16, 1970

Approved: _____

Advisor

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INTRODUCTION

The meaning of Black Power is one of the pre-occupations of Black people. How to embody that meaning in some creative and constructive course of action is a pre-occupation of Black leaders. One can easily discover that there are as many definitions of Black Power as there are people trying to define it. The advocates of Black Power are advocating it out of their understanding of it and the possibilities which it affords.

Since the term "Black Power" was coined, the concept developed, and the movement promoted, there has been reaction upon reaction to it. This movement is real; it is with us, and all men, regardless of who they are, must deal with it. In this paper I shall attempt to establish my understanding of Black Power, the situation out of which the movement arose, the implications of Black Power for Black people, and lift up a few ideas concerning the future of the movement.

WHY BLACK POWER?

One of the most misunderstood beings on this planet is the Black being, particularly the Black American. It is understandable, then, why Black Power would be misunderstood.

To begin with, it is necessary to understand that the cry of Black Power is a cry of disappointment.

"For centuries the Black man has been caught in the tentacles of white power. Many Negroes have given up faith in the white majority because white power with total control has left them empty-handed."¹

Black Power is the attempt of Black people to make some radical and thorough-going changes in the structure of this society.

There was a time when we stressed integration. We wanted civil rights. This struggle failed us in so many ways that today Blacks are saying, in effect, if we are going to

¹Martin Luther King, Jr., Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 38.

live in this society, we are going to make some radical and thorough-going changes in it. The problem is not with us, but with this sick society, therefore, we must change it.

Black Power is an attempt to get Blacks to have a true and honest opinion of who they are. The term Black Power came out of the anguished response to despair on the part of the Blacks in America. An identity was sought which would be authentic.

The Civil Rights Movement had been a continuing movement in American history and in the late fifties and early sixties it reached a certain depth and out of it developed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Blacks began to feel encouraged because they felt the victories which they had sought had been won.

In the Fall of 1965 something happened. Watts blew up and America responded. A less liberal Congress came on the scene; liberal legislation stopped and the racist heart of America came back to the surface.

White people became frustrated to the reaction of Blacks and they did not know which way to turn. Blacks began to see that America had been playing games with us and, in despair, we cried out, "I will be and I will be as I am".

This is Black Power.

Black Power is also a call to Black people to amass their economic and political power to achieve their legitimate goals. The Black man is in a state of oppression today because he is powerless.

Black Power is a psychological call to manhood; a call to throw off the shackles of self-hatred and denial; a call to self-affirmation and appreciation.

"....It is the determination to glory in blackness and to resurrect joyously the African past."²

The tendency to ignore the Black man's contribution to American life strips him of his personhood. Black Power says to the Black man that his freedom is not dependent upon a Lincoln, a Kennedy, a Johnson, or a Nixon Emancipation Proclamation. It is a recognition of the fact that, as Dr. King states it:

"The Negro will only be truly free when he reaches down to the inner depths of his own being and signs with pen and ink of assertive selfhood his own Emancipation Proclamation."³

²Ibid., pp 39-40.

³Ibid., p. 50.

In attempting to understand the Black Power Movement and to recognize where Blacks are today, we must look back. There may be persons who would desire to live only in the present and forget what is behind. This is not possible because we are today because of all that we have been and all of the hundreds of years that are behind us. We must look at the three hundred and fifty years that Blacks have been in America. During these years we have been a tool of the white man. We have been dehumanized, unfranchized, franchized, disfranchized, depersonalized, and used and misused by the white man.

As a result of this inhuman treatment, we came to the second half of the twentieth century not knowing who we were and trying to reach goals which the white man had set for us.

Not knowing who he was, the Black man would answer to such names as boy, girl, auntie, uncle, etc. His name may have been Henry, but he had not been able to identify himself with the man, Henry. We didn't know who we were.

In light of the above statement, James Cone would have us to know that:

"Black Power means black freedom, black self-determination, wherein black people no longer view themselves as being without human dignity, but as men, human beings,

with the ability to carve out their own destiny."⁴

For many, Black Power is the reaction to white oppression. Many young Black men were once dedicated to the cause of non-violence. They have seen the most brutal of white violence against Blacks go unpunished with nothing said about it. When Black and white Civil Rights workers have died together in the struggle for social justice, the death of the white man gets more attention and concern than the death of a Black man who dies for the same cause and even if he dies first. An example of this was seen when:

"Stokely and his colleagues from SNCC were with us in Alabama when Jimmy Lee Jackson, a brave young Negro man, was killed and when James Reeb, a committed Unitarian white Minister, was fatally clubbed to the ground. . . .President Johnson sent flowers to the gallant Mrs. Reeb, and in his eloquent, 'We shall overcome' speech, paused to mention that one person, James Reeb, had already died in the struggle. Somehow the President forgot to mention Jimmy Jackson, who died first. The parents and sister of Jimmy received no flowers from the President."⁵

This does not mean that the death of James Reeb was less than tragic. The failure to mention Jimmy Jackson

⁴James H. Cone, Black Power and Black Theology. (New York: The Seabury Press), 1969, p. 6.

⁵King, p. 34.

simply reinforced the impression that to white America the life and death of a Black man is insignificant and meaningless.

THE COMMUNITY SCENE

Black Power has given the Black community a profound resurrection. I live and work in the Black community and I have seen with my own eyes Black Power bringing out the best in men--the rebirth of being black. Blacks are no longer doubting themselves, but are beginning to doubt the society that has caused them to question their own worth.

Walk down the streets of the Black community and what do you see--young men and women wearing afros, the natural look, dashikis, tikis, giving the Black Power sign by raising their fist, engaging in the Black handshake, carrying an afro comb in their pocket and taking it out occasionally to comb their hair, putting up Black is Beautiful signs, setting up Black book stores, African Boutiques, soul food signs, Black Power signs, Black liberation schools and projects, an institute of the Black world in which a community of scholars, artists and organizers have become a center for research on the past, present, and future of the Black Community, Library Documentation Projects which attempts to show by documents the

struggle of Black people. What do you hear--Black young men and women calling each other brother and sister and the voice of James Brown ringing out to the music of "I'm Black and I'm Proud."

We are living in a society in which Black has always been associated with that which is ugly, inferior, and evil. It is seen quite vividly in our language. Such words as blackball, blackmail, black art, black sheep, black list, and black market express this. One might think this is an extreme but how true it is that angel food cake is white and devil's food cake is black. Not only this, but Black people have traditionally been referred to by whites as lazy, sexually immoral, dirty, musty, and intellectually inferior.

Whites have, in effect, refused to see Blacks as people. They are expected to have their place; they must earn their rights; be accepted into the white world only if they are not like the other Blacks, and they are to regard white as superior.

The Black man's view of himself is not his own, but that which has been given him by the white's view of him. As a result, Blackness for most Black people has been undesirable and has meant a negative identity. To call a person Black

was degrading, improper, and not in good taste.

In the Black community there have been three prominent responses to the above type situation. The first is acceptance. In this instance, Blacks have accepted lock, stock, and barrel, those things which the whites said and felt of them. Their views of themselves are no larger than those that white America brain-washed them with. These Blacks act only as whites want them to act. Whatever Mr. Charlie said was always right. Not only was what he said always right, what he had was right also. To this type Black, Mr. Charlie's ice was always a little colder, his sugar was a little sweeter, he cleaned clothes just a little nicer, and his women looked a little better. These type Blacks see no need to strive for progress for Blacks for they are satisfied with business as usual and are referred to by other Blacks as "Uncle Toms" and the "white man's nigger".

The next response goes beyond acceptance on to absorption. In this response Blacks seek to absorb as much of the white man and his culture as possible. Strong attempts are made to assume the identity and role of a white man. They seek to become as white-oriented as possible, for in so doing they intend to lift their status in life. Pursuits were even

made to look like whites. Black women were busy straightening their hair and bleaching their skin, and Black men were busy processing their hair--all done in a futile attempt to become "white".

The final response in the Black community is that of rejection. In this response the attempt is made to live down the image that whites had of Blacks and that Blacks had of themselves. This new image is that of Black Awareness and Black Power.

Rejection is made first of the name "Negro"--a name which Blacks accused the whites of giving them after coming to the new world. The term "Negro" is rejected in preference for "Black". The African past is now appreciated and clothes are worn to symbolize it. As Carmichael and Hamilton point out in their book, "Black Power", Blacks are:

"...becoming aware that they have a history that pre-dates their forced introduction to this country. African-American history means a long history beginning on the Continent of Africa, a history not taught in the standard textbooks of this country."⁶

⁶Stokley Carmichael and Hamilton, Charles, Black Power. (New York: Vintage Books), 1967, p. 38.

Black Power has caused brothers and sisters in the Black community to strive for a positive identity. During the movement Blacks have achieved high political offices. Gary and Cleveland have elected Black Mayors, and a Black Mayor has been appointed in Washington. A Black man has been elected as Senator from a New England State; a Black man is on the President's Cabinet; and another Black man sits on the Supreme Court. All of this is truly Black Power.

Today, Blacks are seeking an identity which will give expression to the history and culture of Blacks; an identity which will allow Blacks not to see themselves as whites see them, but as they really are--Black people, Black beautiful people, people with a beautiful heritage, a dynamic present and an unlimited future.

THE HIGH SCHOOL SCENE

The high school experience can be a rewarding one if all students have an equal opportunity to share in the experience, regardless of their race, color, or beliefs.

Black Power has had a profound effect in the high school community in that it has created in Black students the desire to know more about themselves and the contributions of their people to the building of Western Civilization.

For years Black students have been short-changed in terms of getting a true picture of history. They were taught much about white America and virtually nothing about Black America. As a result, concerned Black students began to ask, "Who am I?" The textbooks which were used in the teaching of American History were as inadequate as inadequate could be. Most Black teachers who taught from these textbooks were unable to help their Black students gain a better knowledge of their past because they, themselves, were victims of the same educational system and many of them had failed to do any research on their own in this area.

In light of this situation, Black students left high school as victims of circumstance. No one told them that the Black man has roots deep in Western Civilization. No one told him that:

- a. Blacks helped to build this country.
- b. Blacks fought in all the major wars that this country was involved in.
- c. Blacks in Africa were among the first to make iron.
- d. Black men had been here exploring this land a century before the Mayflower came.
- e. Blacks discovered Arizona and Nebraska for the Spanish.
- f. A Black man founded Chicago.
- g. A Black man invented the corn-harvester.
- h. A Black man invented America's first shoe-lasting machine.
- i. A Black man invented the traffic light.
- j. A Black man performed the first successful heart operation in Chicago.
- k. Blacks developed the first blood plasma bank.

No one told them these things (just to mention a few), nor any of the numerous other contributions made by Blacks. One can readily see that Black students came out of high school "thinking white", having only a knowledge of the white man,

his culture, social patterns and contributions.

To add to the dilemma, the Black high school student was victimized by a so-called "separate, but equal" school system. The only thing true about this system was that it was separate, because it was a long way from being equal. Several attempts to change this system have been met with bitter resistance from the white community, which is another case for Black students to see how difficult it is to live in a society controlled by whites.

In the midst of the situation in which the Black student found himself, Black Power emerged. This movement gave the Black student a sense of RACIAL PRIDE. With this kind of pride existing within, a high school student writes:

"I am Black.
Black in mind, that is.
For once I was white,
I was a Tom.

I was lost,
But now I'm found.
Lost in White,
Found to Black.

Now I am Free,
Free from the boundaries of the white man,
Free to walk Black, talk Black,
Think Black, and be Black.

I am Black,
I am Proud.
For, Black is beauty,
And Black is inferior to no one and nothing."⁷

After having interviewed selected high school students in Atlanta, Georgia, it appears to me that Black high school students have an awareness which has made them conscious of their own Blackness and a deep desire to study and appreciate their past. It has caused them to engage quite actively in the symbolic meaning of Black Power.

Not only have they engaged in the symbolic elements, but they have also sought to identify with the issues of today which concern Black People. As a result, Black high school students are constantly engaging in symposiums, plays, panel discussions, debates which depict the Black situation, and they are requesting noted Black leaders to speak at their schools in an attempt to enlighten them on the issues concerning Black people. Many Black students today try to see the Black Power Movement in terms of its intellectual trust. Black Power, to them, is an opportunity to prepare their minds to meet the new challenges which the movement now has afforded them. These Black students believe that if there is

⁷George Gillis, "I Am Black", in "poems comin' from a BLACK thing", comp. by Faythe Smith and Arthur Smith, Forum 66, June 1967 (mimeographed).

going to be any real continuation of this movement, there must be trained minds to initiate it. All in all, Black high school students are proud of the movement. It has helped them to piece together shattered self-images and seek for new meaning in their lives.

THE COLLEGE SCENE

The Black college has been a vital force in the perpetuation of the Black Power Movement. The students in these colleges are demanding that the Black college re-define itself, establish an authentic identity, and begin to serve the real interest of the Black community.

Black college students are convinced that Black Power is the means by which Black Liberation will be attained. They have seen that the Black college traditionally has only been a means to raise Blacks to the "middle-class", which has little or no concern for the Black masses. This is a fact because the Black college has traditionally taught Black students to "think white", to adopt in toto the general values of white society and reject their own traditional culture.

In light of the above, Black students have pressed for a Black College to be the means of liberation of the Black community. The emphasis on the Black community does not limit the college in its educational thrust for all people,

nor is it designed to exclude white people. The participation of everyone in the college must be based upon their concern for the welfare of the Black community.

The Black college attempts to affirm a positive identity and to assist men and women in becoming whole persons and to struggle for a better life. In light of this, the Black College seeks to become an active center of learning because it realizes that education is a liberating force on men's minds and bodies.

A Black curriculum lies at the core of the Black college. It is presently not a reality in all Black colleges, but is being diligently sought for. A Black curriculum, or Afro-American curriculum:

"deals with studies relevant to Afro-American people and does not seek to justify itself in relationship to subjects taught at white universities. Basic to the Afro-American curriculum is the desire of Afro-Americans to establish their own identity and their own cultural heritage."⁸

Most Black colleges are attempting to do something in this area. If they have not been able to institute a Black curriculum, they are attempting to put Black emphasis on all

⁸Summer Task Force on Afro-American Curriculum, Report to the Council of Presidents of The Atlanta University Center, (Unpublished, Atlanta, 1968), p. 6.

courses where such is possible.

Black students and faculties realize that the above is a necessity because education for Blacks today cannot be designed just to adjust to the white world. A Black curriculum must:

"Meet the unique needs of the Negro students. Negro students in America are undergoing a crisis of identity. . . .the original premise upon which Negro colleges were established is valid and, for that reason, we see Negro colleges as an institutional means for assisting their students in working through the crisis of Negro identity."⁹

In addition to the Black curriculum, there is a need to find new avenues of scholarship. As Blacks, we must constantly do research on the Black Experience. The results of this research should be reflected in the mainstream of the Black college in order that the Black students and faculties will become responsible to themselves and to the Black community.

There are students on many college campuses who believe that the way to liberation is by violence. As a result of this belief they have sought to make the college an armed camp. This type of reaction only reflects a dimension of the

⁹Ibid., p. 2.

movement which is very real and must be considered seriously.

Within the context of the Black Power movement, Black colleges are working to liberate Black people. This liberation requires reason, skill, commitment, effort, and imagination. It will be through this liberation that Black people will be able to work toward taking their rightful place in the mainstream of American life.

THE RELIGIOUS SCENE

On the religious scene, Black Power has been a much needed ideology.

Conventional Protestantism in America has taught us that the main business of religion is saving souls. This has been a tragedy and, in so many ways, has prevented us from living up to our Christian responsibility. Hutchison describes it as follows:

"The religious tragedy is that such religion fails utterly to bring any of our life, individual or social, under the perspective of biblical religion. To put it bluntly, there is nothing essentially Christian in such a faith whatever the label it bears. The moral tragedy is that it affords no principle of social judgment whereby American interest or values may be realistically appraised and evaluated. Our social policies and attitudes are thus deprived of the wisdom and perspective which the Christian tradition might give them."¹⁰

This tragedy lies at the heart of the Black Experience. It has scarred the souls and wounded the spirit of the Black

¹⁰ John A. Hutchison, Editor. Christian Faith and Social Action. (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1953), p. 7.

man. The whole dirty business of slavery was based on the premise that the Black man is a thing to be used, not a person to be respected. This in itself is tragic. The other dimension of the tragedy is that the Black man was converted to a conventional religion which endorsed the system which trapped him.

Undergirding this system of slavery and indoctrination was conventional Protestantism which played a vital role in the whole process. The tragedy of the whole mess is that the ethical codes were constructed such that the business of saving souls could apply to the slaves and, yet, leave the institution of slavery intact. Salvation was expressed in "other-worldly" terms, and religion had little or no relation to the problems of society. Such has been the Black Experience. In light of such an experience, Black Power has a tremendous emphasis within the context of religion.

According to James Cone:

"Some religionists would consider Black Power as the work of the Anti-Christ. Others would suggest that such a concept should be tolerated as an expression of Christian love to the misguided Black brother. It is my thesis, however, that Black Power, even in its most radical expression is not the antithesis of Christianity, nor is it a heretical idea to be

tolerated with painful forbearance.
It is, rather, Christ's central message
to twentieth century America."¹¹

The Black Church and Black religious leaders are under obligation to strive for a creative use of Black Power, religiously, socially, economically, educationally, and in any other way which is viable. These leaders cannot run behind those who would lead us astray. These religious leaders must be equipped to point the way to the Black community.

This type leadership begins with our type of message. The message of "other-worldliness" must be replaced with one which is relevant in the lives of Black people NOW! God must be presented as a reality which is alive, ever-present, and active among Black people.

If Jesus is universal, then his universality must be preached. Not only must it be preached, but practiced. Even the way in which Jesus is presented through pictures must reflect his universality. Black people must be able to identify with the man Jesus. It is for this reason that much

¹¹James H. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 1.

emphasis is placed upon the Black Jesus, the Black Messiah.

As a part of the Black Power Movement within the religious context, a Black Manifesto has emerged. This manifesto was directed to Christian churches and Jewish synagogues. It holds that the secular and social institution in America has sinned greatly over the issue of slavery in America. This manifesto presupposes that today the evil and sin of slavery still affects and oppresses vast numbers of Black people. The manifesto reaffirms the fact that when past sins of man are recognized, a dramatic atonement is necessary. It sees slavery in America as a past evil which is presented to the church with a bill of Five Hundred Million Dollars for a debt too long owed. It holds that the church, in particular, must now pay part of her debt as the extension of the body of a crucified, but resurrected Lord.

The Black church and Black religious leaders must keep the Black community alerted to the reality that Black Power does not mean hating whites. One can love his own people without hating another race of people. We have an I-Thou Soul House for teen-agers at our church. One night one of the Black youth wanted to throw the young white man out who

was working with us. His reason was that white people were not supposed to be in a Soul House. We explained to him that "soul" had nothing to do with color, but that "soul" was concerned with love and being. After explaining it in this manner and having a further talk with the group, the tension ceased.

The Black community must see, as we explained to the group at the Soul House, that when one hates, he dehumanizes the one he is hating and makes a beast of himself. At the same time, the white community must be informed that they do not have to stand on our backs to be tall. We must all be able to stand together, loving, respecting, forgiving, and trying to make of this old world a new world.

AFTER BLACK POWER, THEN WHAT?

The future of any event has meaning only in terms of its results. Who among us can say what the final results of the Black Power Movement will be? All we can do is attempt to make educated guesses in light of what is involved.

The Black Power Movement is a part of a total Black revolution. This revolution is long overdue, but it has finally come at this point in our history. We must all live through this revolution realizing that as we live through it we will experience something which will shake our very foundations. It is in the shaking of the foundation that we begin to see the true nature of the revolution and begin to experience its redemptiveness.

The revolution has been aided by scholars who have written to articulate to us what the movement is all about and to help to give it some perspective. Among these are such sources as Black Power, by Carmichael and Hamilton; Many Shades of Black, by Wormley and Fenderson; Black Power and Urban Unrest, by Wright; Black Theology and Black Power,

by Cone; Black on Black, by Adoff; White Over Black, by Jordan; Die, Nigger, Die!, by Rap Brown; The Black Power Revolt, by Barbour; Is Anybody Listening to Black America?, by C. Eric Lincoln, plus numerous others.

The Black Revolution is a revolution launched to win the minds of Black people. Our "fight" is for self-determination, identity, race pride, appreciation of our blackness, and respect. Our fight is also to change the realities which stare us daily in the race and which see us as less than human; realities which cause us to suffer from all sorts of injustices and discriminations.

Our revolution must have direction--a direction which comes as a result of an ideology which was developed for our own particular situation--and a direction which will give us purpose as well as identity.

I feel that the Black revolution is a necessary event in the lives of Black people. I believe that it is an interim period we must go through before we can accomplish total integration. Before we accomplish total integration, we need to experience what we are experiencing today. Not only do we need it, but whites need it also. Before total

integration comes (whenever that is) whites must respect Blacks, appreciate them for who they are and give them their long-deserved place in society--and give it to them without questions or reservations. Before total integration, Blacks must come to the realization of who they are and be willing to be who they are, with a consciousness of their Blackness and an appreciation for it.

The Blackness to which I refer is a philosophy, a state of mind, an awareness of the conditions which affect Black people and oppressed people everywhere. This Blackness is not an end in itself. It is not automatically good or bad. Its worth depends upon the work of the particular persons involved. Existentially, I am a Black man, but the extent of my manhood and my worth will depend upon my own initiative--my desire to be and to be as I am.

Finally, the Black revolution has forced America to take a good look at herself. How she deals with what she sees will determine the future of this revolution.

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